

What's In A Name?

American Indian Sports Mascots: Beyond The Hype And Into The Classroom ...

Model Social Studies, History, Government Curriculum

Fall 2003

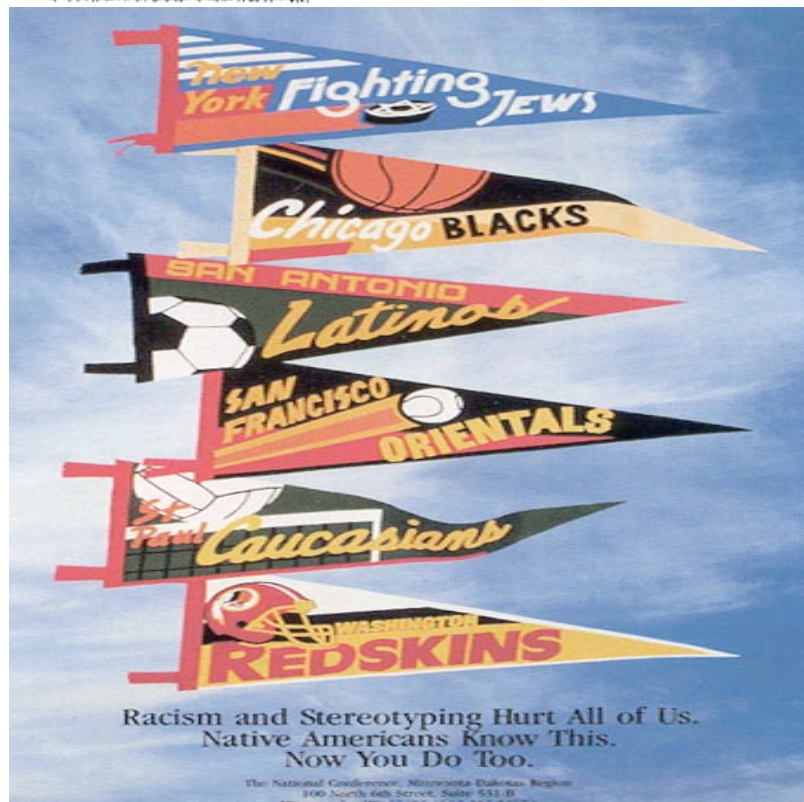
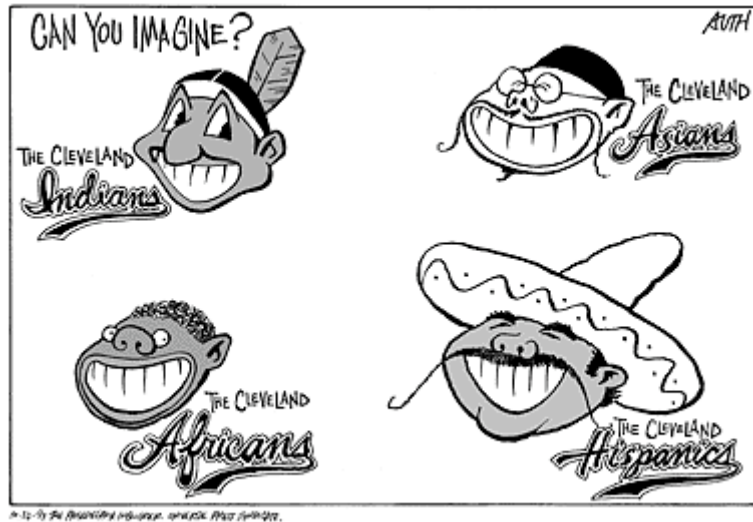
Developed for the Office of Public Instruction



Linda McCulloch, Superintendent
Montana Office of Public Instruction
PO Box 202501
Helena, MT 59620-2501
www.opi.state.mt.us

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American Indian Sports Mascots: Beyond The Hype And Into The Classroom ...



Students will be given a chance to critically examine contemporary and historical portrayals of American Indians as mascots.

Grades 7 – 12 Social Studies, History, Government

Grade 8 Social Studies Benchmark

- ✓ Explain how and why events (e.g., American Revolution, Battle of the Little Big Horn, immigration, Women’s Suffrage) may be interpreted differently according to the points of view of participants, witnesses, reporters, and historians.
- ✓ Compare and illustrate the ways various groups (e.g., cliques, clubs, ethnic communities, American Indian tribes) meet human needs and concerns (e.g., self esteem, friendship, heritage) and contribute to personal identity.

Grade 12 Social Studies Benchmark

- ✓ Investigate, interpret, and analyze the impact of multiple historical and contemporary view points concerning events within and across cultures, major world religions, and political systems (e.g., assimilation, values, beliefs, conflicts).
- ✓ Analyze and illustrate the major issues concerning history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes and bands in Montana and the United States (e.g., gambling, artifacts, repatriation, natural resources, language, jurisdiction).

**Descriptive Title: American Indian Sports Mascots: Beyond The Hype
 And Into The Classroom ...**

Duration: 2 – 3 class periods (ongoing process)

Lesson Description

- ✓ Students will critically examine contemporary and historical portrayals of American Indians as sports mascots.
- ✓ Students will address the issue of how American Indians have been represented in American culture.

Concepts

- ✓ Students will examine the mascot issue from multiple perspectives:
 - National issues – Examples include: Washington Redskins, Cleveland Indians, Kansas City Chiefs, Florida State Seminoles, University of North Dakota Fighting Sioux.
 - Local/State – Make sure to discuss issues of teams on/near reservations with American Indian mascots. Examples include: Browning Indians,

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Poplar Indians, Lodge Grass Indians, Heart Butte Warriors, Hot Springs Savages. What about teams not on reservations or with very few or no American Indian student population?

Teacher Background Information

Included here is a sampling of online articles dealing with the mascot issue.

The first article is from Dr. Cornel Pewawardy entitled: Why Educators Can't Ignore Mascots – Highly recommended reading!

<http://www.aics.org/mascot/cornel.html>

<http://www.aics.org/mascot/truth.html>

<http://www.nativeculture.com/lisamitten/mascots.html>

<http://www.aistm.org/1indexpage.htm>

Students' Background Knowledge

- ✓ Ask students if they are familiar with the controversy surrounding the use of American Indian imagery as sports mascots. Mention both national and local issues, i.e., professional sports and college and high school sports.
- ✓ Brainstorm with students. Why might someone (may not necessarily have to be an American Indian) be offended by the use of American Indians as mascots? What actions might be considered offensive?
 - Examples include: tomahawk chop, various team cheers/mock tribal chants, "Hollywood" drum beat, fans dressing up as Indians, opposing teams with signs that say "beat the Indians."
- ✓ Brainstorm a list of teams with American Indian mascots.
- ✓ What should the purpose of a mascot be?
- ✓ If schools do use Indian mascots should they also have an obligation to educate their student population and community in regards to that particular mascot? What about professional organizations? College teams? Do they also have an obligation to represent American Indians in a respectful manner?
- ✓ What if schools were to adopt other cultural or ethnic groups as mascots? Ask about the Fighting Jews, the New York Hispanics, or the San Francisco Blackskins. Would people be offended?

Teacher Concerns/Issues

- ✓ Make sure to point out that schools with American Indian mascots usually do not intend to demean or belittle a culture but actually perceive themselves as honoring American Indian people.
- ✓ Can someone with good intentions actually be perpetuating stereotypes of the worst kind?
- ✓ Other issues/topics that usually arise when discussing American Indian mascots: e.g., Fighting Irish, Minnesota Vikings, Dallas Cowboys.
 - How are these groups different from American Indian mascots? Mention that Notre Dame is a Catholic controlled institution with a great deal of Irish representation within the college. It is a name they chose for themselves.
 - Would the Irish people be upset if an all Indian school were to adopt the Fighting Irish as their mascot? What about if they were representing all Irish people in very stereotypical manners and unintentionally mocking Irish culture?
 - Mention to the students that the Vikings are no longer a living cultural group. Make sure to mention that there are indeed descendants of Viking cultures still alive but are Viking ceremonies still practiced? Usage of feathers, drums, paint, and songs that are still considered sacred by many tribes comes into question.
 - Cowboys can be from any racial/ethnic group – it is a broad category as opposed to using a distinct racial/ethnic group such as American Indians.
- ✓ Perhaps mascots could be used in a way to reclaim tribal identity. For example, instead of the Browning Indians maybe they could use a term from their own language referencing warrior or Blackfeet. This might help ensure a greater sensitivity along with a renewed sense of pride and identity for the Blackfeet people themselves.
- ✓ You could mention that the issue may be that we don't have to entirely do away with American Indian mascots – it is what is done in an educational sense with the mascot – does it truly honor or is it just another stereotypical representation of American Indian people? What might schools with American Indian mascots do to ensure a more accurate representation of American Indian people and cultures?
- ✓ Make sure to address the issue of schools on/near reservations with significant American Indian student populations. Is it different for these types of schools to have an American Indian mascot as opposed to a school with no American Indian students?

Teaching Suggestions

One class period to introduce the topic. The next class period for research. A third class period for presentation of arguments/discussion.

- ✓ Students could debate the issue of mascots at multiple levels.
- ✓ Professional teams, college teams, high school/junior high teams.
- ✓ Assign three groups: For Mascots, Against Mascots, and Rethinking Mascots.
- ✓ Give students one class period to gather background information. Require students to find at least five different resources.
- ✓ Have students check out websites for teams that use American Indian mascots. Do they acknowledge the issue? Is there a history regarding the mascot? What is their rationale for having an American Indian mascot?
- ✓ Each group will be given a chance to present their side of the issue using supporting evidence.

Assessment

- ✓ Students will demonstrate an understanding and awareness of the issue through in-class presentations.
- ✓ Students could write a brief essay on the issue. Where do they stand and why?
- ✓ Students could interview representatives from schools that do have mascots. What are their perceptions?
- ✓ Before introducing the topic you could conduct an anonymous pretest regarding student attitudes/knowledge of the issue. After the various presentations you could administer the same survey to see if attitudes/knowledge has changed.
 - Sample questions could include:
 - Are you familiar with the mascot issue?
 - Do you think American Indian mascots perpetuate stereotypes?
 - What is the purpose of a sports mascot?

Further Information

Numerous organizations (both American Indian focused and broad based) such as the National Education Association, the National Indian Education Association, the National Congress of American Indians and the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights have come out

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with statements opposing the use of American Indian mascots. Students could also analyze the various statements and discuss.

Included below is the statement from the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

United States Commission on Civil Rights

Statement of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights on the Use of Native American Images and Nicknames as Sports Symbols

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights calls for an end to the use of Native American images and team names by non-Native schools. The Commission deeply respects the rights of all Americans to freedom of expression under the First Amendment and in no way would attempt to prescribe how people can express themselves. However, the Commission believes that the use of Native American images and nicknames in school is insensitive and should be avoided. In addition, some Native American and civil rights advocates maintain that these mascots may violate anti-discrimination laws. These references, whether mascots and their performances, logos, or names, are disrespectful and offensive to American Indians and others who are offended by such stereotyping. They are particularly inappropriate and insensitive in light of the long history of forced assimilation that American Indian people have endured in this country.

Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s many overtly derogatory symbols and images offensive to African-Americans have been eliminated. However, many secondary schools, post-secondary institutions, and a number of professional sports teams continue to use Native American nicknames and imagery. Since the 1970s, American Indian leaders and organizations have vigorously voiced their opposition to these mascots and team names because they mock and trivialize Native American religion and culture.

It is particularly disturbing that Native American references are still to be found in educational institutions, whether elementary, secondary or post-secondary. Schools are places where diverse groups of people come together to learn not only the "Three Rs," but also how to interact respectfully with people from different cultures. The use of stereotypical

images of Native Americans by educational institutions has the potential to create a racially hostile educational environment that may be intimidating to Indian students. American Indians have the lowest high school graduation rates in the nation and even lower college attendance and graduation rates. The perpetuation of harmful stereotypes may exacerbate these problems.

The stereotyping of any racial, ethnic, religious or other groups when promoted by our public educational institutions, teach all students that stereotyping of minority groups is acceptable, a dangerous lesson in a diverse society. Schools have a responsibility to educate their students; they should not use their influence to perpetuate misrepresentations of any culture or people. Children at the elementary and secondary level usually have no choice about which school they attend. Further, the assumption that a college student may freely choose another educational institution if she feels uncomfortable around Indian-based imagery is a false one. Many factors, from educational programs to financial aid to proximity to home, limit a college student's choices. It is particularly onerous if the student must also consider whether or not the institution is maintaining a racially hostile environment for Indian students.

Schools that continue to use Indian imagery and references claim that their use stimulates interest in Native American culture and honors Native Americans. These institutions have simply failed to listen to the Native groups, religious leaders, and civil rights organizations that oppose these symbols. These Indian-based symbols and team names are not accurate representations of Native Americans. Even those that purport to be positive are romantic stereotypes that give a distorted view of the past. These false portrayals prevent non-Native Americans from understanding the true historical and cultural experiences of American Indians. Sadly, they also encourage biases and prejudices that have a negative effect on contemporary Indian people. These references may encourage interest in mythical "Indians" created by the dominant culture, but they block genuine understanding of contemporary Native people as fellow Americans.

The Commission assumes that when Indian imagery was first adopted for sports mascots it was not to offend Native Americans. However, the use of the imagery and traditions, no matter how popular, should end when they are offensive. We applaud those who have been leading the fight to educate the public and the institutions that have voluntarily discontinued the use of insulting mascots. Dialogue and education are the roads to understanding. The use of American Indian mascots is not a trivial matter. The Commission has a firm understanding of the problems of poverty, education, housing, and health care that face many Native Americans. The fight to eliminate Indian nicknames and images in sports is only one front

of the larger battle to eliminate obstacles that confront American Indians. The elimination of Native American nicknames and images as sports mascots will benefit not only Native Americans, but all Americans. The elimination of stereotypes will make room for education about real Indian people, current Native American issues, and the rich variety of American Indian cultures in our country.

The United States Commission on Civil Rights
April 13, 2001